

## **Scholars to Cal program teams current UC students with area youngsters** **It's one of several mentorship and tutoring programs administered by Stiles Hall, the campus's 120-year-old nonprofit neighbor**

By Carol Hyman | 28 January 2004

It's common knowledge that mentoring helps students with their studies. But what if a fifth grader were guaranteed a mentor for eight years straight, for four to six hours every week? And what if that student and his or her family received other services to help keep them on track?

This kind of attention is more than just a dream for 40 at-risk Berkeley middle-school students in the Berkeley Scholars to Cal program at Stiles Hall, a nonprofit center adjacent to the UC Berkeley campus. The youngsters, paired with 40 undergraduate mentors, are in their third year of the program, which will see them through high-school graduation.

"One of the goals is to give students the belief and the opportunity to succeed. The students respond; the families respond," says John Brack, the program's coordinator. Among his duties, the recent Berkeley graduate spends four afternoons a week with the young students, checking their notebooks and discussing school and home life with them.

In addition, Brack coordinates a Saturday "academy" on the Berkeley campus, where the scholars work with their mentors one-on-one for close to two hours, as well as participating in an hour of group activities. (The academy goes to five days a week for the month of July.) According to Brack, the program has resulted in higher grades for the students and more involvement from their parents. The mentors also have the young scholars spend time with them on campus, to afford them a close-up view of college life.

To remain in the program, each middle-school student must have a family member willing to be involved. Most of the time it's a parent, but in some cases it's an aunt, uncle, or older sibling. "A family member's involvement has been an important element in the success in the program," says Brack. The families have formed a parents' council, which meets about once a month, with subcommittees that meet more often.

### **A bridge between home and school**

"When you're young, the settings you're in — family and school — and the degree to which they overlap add to developmental outcomes," says assistant professor of social welfare Susan Stone, who has done extensive research on children and school transitions. "That's one of the many wonderful things about this program: The mentors really act as a bridge between those two environments." Particularly because the transitions to middle school and high school "can be unsupported times of life," she adds, "meaningful connections to adults will help the students get through these difficult periods."

As important as the mentors and families are to the program, another key element is the relationships that have grown among the youngsters.

"The peer relationship that develops among the mentees is invaluable," says Brack. "There are 39 kids in the same situation as you." Most are in classes with other scholars, and they all have the opportunity to spend time together on Saturdays and, occasionally, after school.

Their fellow students provide consistency as well, because the mentors may change over the years, for reasons including graduation from Berkeley.

Losing one's mentor isn't always a minus, says Brack. "While it's great to see a Cal student stay with a mentee for years, kids getting a new mentor get to interact with new role models, as well as learn about cultures different from their own."

One mentor who has been with his mentee beyond his own Berkeley graduation is Andrew Houston, who has helped seventh-grader David Triplette for almost two years. Though Houston now has a full-time job and is applying to law school, he still makes time to work with David. "One of the main reasons I wanted to stick around Berkeley was David," Houston says. "We've put in a lot of time together, and I didn't want any of it to go to waste. But even if I leave the area, I'll always be there for him."

Houston says he can relate well to David because they are both African-American males from similar backgrounds. "I was a late bloomer," he explains. "If I would have had someone like myself when I was David's age, I think I would have been prepared to come directly from high school to Cal, rather than go to community college first."

Houston has seen positive changes in David in the time they have worked together. "When I first met him, David was a good student, but he had never had anybody to tell him, 'This is what you need to be a remarkable student,'" Houston says. "He had no one to say, 'Hey, David, do your homework.' Now he does, and he's really doing great."

And while he acknowledges that David is getting the lion's share of benefits from the program, Houston feels he has profited as well.

"Overall, Berkeley Scholars to Cal is one of the best experiences I've had at UC Berkeley," he said. "Being part of the program was like being part of a family, a community."

### **More study, less soccer**

When seventh-grader Antonio Hernandez met his mentor, Marina Perez, he was initially disappointed. "He had wanted a boy," said Perez, who has been Antonio's mentor since the program began. "So I told him, 'Yeah, but I'm cool.'" The middle-school student was impressed by how much Perez knew about sports, and he taught her how to play soccer.

"Our beginning meetings were hanging out, playing sports," she said. "I'd come and have lunch with him at school, or see him after school."

Their sessions lately have focused much more on middle-school academics than sports. "Antonio's grades have come down," she says, "so our activities are now limited to studying. He has a 2.7 GPA now, and I told him I want him to have at least a 3.2. When he says a 2.7 isn't bad, I say that's right, but it won't get you into Berkeley. We're working on trying to get him focused."

Antonio's parents are not fluent in English, so Perez acts as a liaison between the school and the family. She has met with Antonio's teachers and the school administration to help work out problems and get answers to his parents' questions.

While Berkeley Scholars to Cal is only one of the many tutoring and mentoring programs run by Stiles Hall, its director, David Stark, thinks it has the potential to be its most important one.

"We are convinced long-term commitment is the way to go," Stark says. "We're hoping, through this program, that we can prove it and get many more kids into similar programs. We'd love to see this program replicated on campuses all over the country."

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